



June 2010						
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Speedy update

Well, amigos, I know it's been a long time since some jocular words appeared here, and thank you all for nagging me for news, plus your comments and encouraging utterings. This entry aims to bring us up to date with a speedy summary before I delve into the glory details in the next post.

I last left you at the delights of Lake Atitlán, Guatemala... from there I headed to Antigua, the old colonial capital of Guate and a rather fabulous place to visit. Heading east thereafter, via Guatemala City, I stopped at Río Dulce for one night at the river-located and Swiss-run *Casa Perico*. Then it was up the way north two hours to Poptún and to the splendid eco hotel, *Finca Ixobel*, where I worked as a volunteer for six weeks (hence the lack of blog action). That done I headed back to Río Dulce, where I volunteered for one day at *Casa Guatemala*, an orphanage for 250 Guatemalan children. A bumpy five-hour 4×4 shuttle took me thereafter across mountain ranges and dusty dirt-tracks to the village of Lanquín, from there I headed to the amazing Semuc Champey, with its incredible jungle settings and natural pools and waterfalls. Photos and vids coming sooooo! Finally it was back to Antigua for a night in order to get the stuff together for the off. Gracias Guate, the next stop is Los Angeles, California, and then over to Sedona, Arizona, to volunteer at a retreat being organised by the Greenheart Chicago crew, which kicks off with the full moon. Aooooo!





Full tales of the above travels coming soon!
Love & peace and fond ribbles to you all.

April 26th, 2010 | Category: Uncategorized | [Leave a comment](#)

Antigua and Earth Lodge, Guatemala

Greetings blog followers! A pictorial post here for you below,

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with a selection of recent photos taken in the fine Guatemalan city of Antigua, and at the fabulous **Earth Lodge**, located 20 minutes outside the town. Testing out the new camera (a Kodak Zi8) on loan from the **CCI**. Thanks guys, this beats the motorola phone!

Play around with the controls by rolling your mouse over the slideshow, or click on it to open the web album page.

Further travel commentary and off-topic musings coming soon.

March 12th, 2010 | Category: Uncategorized | [Leave a comment](#)

Guatemala - Lake Atitlán area

Ahhhh Guatemala... "tierra de los arboles" (land of trees)

Current Exchange Rate – 1\$ is 8 Quetzles. 1€ is around 11 Quetzales.

I shall be adding some photos and more tales here soon.

Thursday 28th January 2010

8am shuttle bus from San Cristóbal, Mexico to Panajachel, Lake Atitlán, Guatemala. Via border crossing and change of shuttle. Cruised through regions till arrival at Panajachel at around 5.30pm, with travel buddies Richard and Lisa, met at hostel in San Cristóbal.

We checked out C./Santander in Panajachel for hostels, and

finally chose Posada Monte Rosa, on C./ Monterrey, which looked nice with a tranquil courtyard entrance and good sized rooms with private bathroom for 50Q per night. Of an evening we got stuck into some litres of Guatemalan beer, Gallo (2 for 60Q), and chomped on some good street food (16 Quetzales), at the aptly named stall “Smoke gets in your eyes”... v. good and jovial stuff. We said a quick hello to the lake and headed for the hay, after a long day of travelling on the shuttle bus.

Lucky on timing, I attended the last few days of “CyanoBacteria” an Ecological Feria happening in the Panajachel’s central venues, with talks, presentations and Q&A sessions during the day, followed by performances, live bands and the odd vinyl jock having a pinch of “techno”, of an evening.

I hooked up with David and fellow new volunteer, Helen (Aka Elena or Deva), and of we trooped with our gear to the dock for Santiago launches and chicken boats. A launch dropped us off at private dock and present venue for the Project Nuevo Mundo initiative, run by David. See www.projectnuevomundo.org. Here I would stay for the next two weeks, at last away from the noise of traffic and hustle, bustle, haggle, bedraggle and hawking commerce. Peace on the shores of lake Atitlán, with the sounds of nature all around...!

Funny Things about Guatemala – Lake Atitlán Area

This is an entertaining and beautiful part of Guate; famously Aldous Huxley called it “the most beautiful lake in the world”, and I would say it’s very safe as well, given the normal precautions for travellers are applied. Wandering around Panajachel, there are abundant artesan stalls and shops selling well-priced, locally made goods and gifts in all shapes, colours and sizes. I am called “amigo” by street sellers countless times... I had no idea I had so many friends here, and I am often offered “wheat” (or that’s what it sounded like), by lots of folks either racing past on their bicycles, in *tuk-tuks* or by baseball-capped up youngsters trying to hawk boat trips around the lake. The lake’s indigenous ladies, in traditional dress, sell (or try to) everything from textiles and clothes, to bananas and trinkets, carrying around their weighty surplus stock on their heads in a marvellous balancing act.

As well as visiting Guatemalan folk, a lot of gringos vacation at the lake area – the beard count on the males is about the same as the head count – and many backpackers head for the town of San Pedro across the lake, where lodging is cheap and there’s a lot on offer in the way of Spanish schools, touristy shops, cafés and restaurants, plus a bit of fun to be had in the bars at night. However, when not on site at Project Nuevo Mundo, I spent most time in Panajachel, on the north shore, staying at the wonderful Hostel El Viajero (towards the lake on C./ Santander), where the hostel manager, Carlos, from Guatemala, looked after me very well,

and we shared many pleasant times together conversing about our countries. The hostel has nice clean rooms, good hot showers, free internet / wifi, a kitchen for cooking and their courtyard is full of beautiful plants and flowers. Like many budget hostels here, they have a long way to go before being classed as “green / ecological”, but hopefully my suggestions will have made a small difference and the hostel will improve in time.

Panajachel – Food Shopping Tips and Tops. Just a few suggestions.

Top Tip: Hagglng is de-rigueur for most things in Guatemala... Get in there with some good-natured banter to avoid paying the gringo mark-up price!

The Market, at the top of C./ Principal (Calle Real) on the outskirts of town, past the church. Perfectly wonderful local fresh fruit, veg, cheese, eggs.... plus fish from the lake – if you fancy it – all sold by locals. There are also some great looking, well-priced *comedores* here and some smelly meat / chicken stalls, plus clothing and house-hold extras, electronics and packaged goods galore.

At markets in Guate, get used to having weights and measurements in good-old imperial pounds and ounces, pints and gallons... not kilograms or litres, just to confuse things a little more...

In street opposite the market look for **Super Pan**, where you can get the cheapest bread and stodge-stocking cakes to accompany a nice cup of tea in your hostel. Also try the *panaderia* near the Church, which has a huge range of tasty cakes and breads at fair prices... try walking past without buying anything!

Sandra's Supermarket, C./ Principal (Calle Real), past the top of C./ Santander. Great mini-supermarket with all the extras you can't find at other *tiendas*, such as wheat- and gluten-free products, organic veg, soya milk, local produce, good herbal teas, sweet chili sauce, and lots more... a bit like IbiFoods in Ibiza, and expect to pay for those imports!

Calle Santander has a large number of restaurants, cafés, bars, street food stalls and cake shops to keep all mouths and pockets happy. A few good vegetarian options at fine prices – a meal for under a fiver easily possible. Beers oscillate around about a reasonable 10-20 Quetzales, and they are just a little bigger (335ml) than Europe bottled beers, but wine is expensive as there's nada local and imports get a price hike as standard.

The Pana Health Food Store, at the “El Patio” commercial center, C./ Santander, about half way down, on your right. Tlf. (502) 5207 4974, www.panahealthfood.com. **Colloidal silver** is available here as are an abundant number of other fine healthy herbs, brews, creams, powders, pills and literature on well-being and good nutrition.

So, my recommendation is to stay in Panajachel, when visiting the area, but do check out the other towns and villages around the lake...each has its own atmosphere and specialities.

Next Chapter: volunteering and more Guatemala tales – the adventures continue!

A big thanks to my Supporters – click for details on who they are!

March 3rd, 2010 | Category: Uncategorized | [Leave a comment](#)

Photo preview of Guatemala

Greetings amigas y amigos!

I just uploaded a few photos from the Motorola phone-cum-camera. The device, kindly donated by Roland, is not the best quality camera, but will give you an idea of things, and “soon” I shall have something better for snapping the shots.

So, just a wee preview of things here in Guatemala, at **Project Nuevo Mundo** and around Lake Atitlán, whilst I get my report written up and on the Blog. Enjoy!

February 14th, 2010 | Category: Uncategorized | [Leave a comment](#)

Magic Mayan marvels in Mexico!



Mérida monument on Paseo Montejo

A big thanks to my Supporters – click for details .

Please do keep sending your comments, I do receive and appreciate them! The most appropriate ones will be published. Anyone wishing to donate to the cause, please contact me: mike@greenheart.info. Many kind thanks. Now on with the tales...

Tuesday 12th January, 2010

Morning flight from Chicago O'Hare to **Cancún**... one hour delay due to door "not arming"... so this being Continental Airlines, we simply stroll to another gate and jump on another plane. Three and-a-half hours later, arrival in sunny Mexico... goodbye winter, hello summer! Got the backpack on and grabbed the bus (42 pesos) to town.. arrival at ADO terminal and walked to Hostel Quetzal (200 pesos per night, bed and good breakfast), my base in the Downtown area of the city.

It was eight years ago that I visited Cancún before, and the town has grown, now with a population of 900,000, and continues well on the map for many tourists coming to enjoy the beaches and warm climes. I steered well clear of the all-inclusive Hotel Area, and enjoyed the great atmosphere of my hostel, the staff all being really friendly and the other guests great folks for buddying up. One fine thing about **Hostel Quetzal** is that every night they provide a free dinner (and cocktails) in the garden for the guests – great stuff and possibly the only hostel in Mexico that does this!



Guillaume and I at Mayan site Chichen Itzá, Mexico

The next day it was up early-ish for an 8am "all inclusive" excursion to the tremendous Mayan city of **Chichen Itzá**. (590 pesos). Accompanied by 4 fellow hostellers, we first visited the sinkhole, Cenote Azul. You could have a dip there if you wanted, but the water looked a bit oily and we were on a limited time. Funnily enough, on descent to the cenote I bumped into a Spanish guy who is a regular Sunday visitor at Casita Verde. El mundo es un pañelo,

ho ho. Next stop on the tour was a Mayan souvenir shop and then we had lunch at a buffet style café, seemingly only for peeps doing the Chichen all-in tour, however it was nice enough food. Then, *por fin*, we arrived at the impressive site itself and had our guided tour of Chichen Itzá, with plenty of

interesting facts, and then the free time to explore. I liked the hand-clapping moments (hear the sound of the Quetzal bird!) and scale of the place, plus the wonderful energy you feel there – really strong in some places. All too soon it was back on bus and a short visit (only had 45mins) to **Valladolid**, which has a an interesting Plaza Mayor, plus a splendid Cathedral, and I tried to explain what a “carajillo” is in square-side café, then had quick look at fine large paintings in the gallery on the plaza.

So, Chichen Itzá is a definite wonder of the world, but next time I'd do it off my own bat, rather than doing the all-inclusive, so as to have more time to contemplate and explore at the beautiful site.

Chichen Itzá bits and bobs

The most powerful ancient Maya city in the Yucatan, which had a population of over 40,000 in its hey day, is massive in scale and provides some fascinating ruins and sites. My favourites included checking out the following:

Castillo de Kukulcán – the serpents spring equinox descent and handclappers hear the sound of the Quetzal bird. The Great Ball Court built AD864. Stunning carvings and yet more great acoustics.

The Observatory – oddly rounded in shape compared with the other structures, slots in the top point due south and toward the setting sun and moon during the spring/autumn equinox. Wonderful energy!

The Court of the Thousand Columns – the place where business was done in ancient times. Majestic columns soar in vast numbers (actually 538 in total), and the atmosphere is of wonder!

Thursday 14th January 2010



Knees up - and shoes off at
Puerto Morelos

I buddied up with fellow hostel guest, Brenda, from San José USA, and we headed down the coast by ADO Bus (20 pesos) to **Puerto Morelos**. There was time for a great walk along the beach there, admiring the sea and sand and sparsely populated coastal area. Only a few folk on the beach itself too. Pelicans were flying close by and I fancy I saw a sea-snake. Then there was a tasty veggie lunch and fruit juice (70 pesos), plus a town wander and visit to

artesan shops. Jumped on a colectivo (5 pesos) back to highway and return shuttle minibus (20 pesos) to Cancún.

Puerto Morelos is a chilled alternative to Cancún, and there's a guy down there named Renato Dorfman who takes on

volunteers on his organic farm. Although I didn't get to see him, check out his page on www.Woof.org for more details. I hope to catch him another time.

So, Friday rolled around and I took a stroll to an ecological place to stay in Cancún... the only one I could locate on the internet for Downtown. Not in my budget range, the **Hotel Rey del Caribe** does look nice and offers recycling bins (still v. rare anywhere in Cancún), has alternative sources for power and even a couple of rooms with a composting toilet. In the afternoon I **volunteered** at the Red Cross (Cruz Roja), and helped box up aid food packages for the victims of the Haiti earthquake.

Saturday saw a visit to the laid-back island of **Isla Mujeres**, as everyone had been highly recommending it. I buddied up with Joanne, from NY and we shared a cab to the port. A modern boat, complete with on-board drinks sellers and top-deck musicians, takes foot passengers from Cancun's Puerto Juárez to Isla: The Ultramarina ferry (140 pesos return). Once on the isle there are plenty of cheapish hotels, or try the Hostel Poc Na down at the beach which looked fun. I enjoyed a great swim from a fine sandy beach, and if I'd had more time I would have checked out the nature reserve located at far end of the isle. Had lunch at cheap restaurant – veggie *huaracha*, rice and beans – and a cold beer (all cost less than 50 pesos). With the wind picking up, took a further stroll around top end of island, had a local coffee and hopped back on the ferry to Cancún. Colectivo back to bus terminal (5 pesos). Well-worth checking out Isla Mujeres, then. Next time I'll stay for a couple of nights to explore the isle properly and get to the nature reserve.

Monday 18th January 2010

It looked like Belize was next on the cards. So it was off to the south of the Yucatan in preparation for a border crossing the following day. This meant a 10.30am ADO bus Cancun to Chetumal (256 pesos, five and-a-half hours). Overcharged by taxi (50 pesos) to **Hostel Chetumal**. This is a nice family-run hostel (dorms around 180 pesos), on Calle Sicilia and San Salvador, but is not close to anything of interest, or near the water front. I took a local town stroll to get my bearings. Chetumal has lots of shops and some big supermarkets for those stocking up before heading for Belize. There's also an excellent Mayan Museum, and a load of Pharmacies, but don't try and buy beer from shops after 9pm, for some reason they have a rule forbidding it! I bought a filling and tasty spicy *tamale* for dinner from a place near my lodgings. Fellow hostellers Anthony from Bristol and Flemish Belgian lassies, Laura and Fyne, were great company, and we chatted and shared travellers' tips and tales till bedtime.

Tuesday 19th January 2010



Laguna Bacalar, near Chetumal, Mexico

Of an afternoon, buddied up with hostel pals and we took shared taxi to Calle de la Independencia (15 pesos) opposite Red Cross, where shared taxis took the four of us (25 pesos, 40km north of Chetumal) to **Laguna Bacalar**. The large lagoon (60km long) allows you good possibilities to swim, chill, stroll around the shore and to take photos of its “seven shades of blue” waters. Come dusk, return trip to Hostel Chetumal and preparation for bus tomorrow.

At the hostel I checked my emails and found that Belize expats, Richard and Alisa (of colloidal silver fame), were not actually in Belize (as hoped), but in Mérida, back up in the north of the Yucatan peninsular! So, handbrake on, change of plans and I hastily booked a bus to Mérida, as I was not wishing to visit Belize without my buds being there...

Wednesday 20th January 2010

11am bus to **Mérida** (256 pesos 6.5 hours), walked to **Posada Casa Chelia** guesthouse (www.casachalia.com). Greeted by affable Belgian co-owner, Jan. Did an evening stroll around town, up street 62 to the Zócalo (main square) and checked out a couple of the other fine *plazas*. The squares were busy with people performing and singing to the crowds, chatting & chilling on the benches, or having their shoes polished. I grabbed a couple of bits for dinner and headed back to the hostel, keen to see more in the light of day tomorrow.

About Mérida. What to see:

Plaza Mayor – shaded by giant laurel trees for locals to relax, chat and enjoy free internet! Seen as the main square and was the center for the conquistador Francisco Montejo in 1542 when Mérida was founded. Standing majestic on the square we find two of the finest buildings in Mérida:

The Cathedral – enormous and with soaring facades, the oldest in the entire American continent, built in Spanish Renaissance style between 1562 and 1598. A pink palace lines the north side of the square – el **Palacio del Gobernador**. This was built in 1892 and is open to the public to admire its architecture and stunning murals by Fernando Castro Cacheco which decorate its patios. One should also visit the immense **Mérida Market**, located on Calle 65, where everything from fruit and chillis to hats, hammocks and traditional dresses can be bought. And don't forget some colonial mansion spotting with a stroll down the tree-lined boulevards of **Paseo Montejo**. These are just a few starters, Mérida has a lot to offer.

Thursday 21st January 2010

Chatted with hostel owners Jan and Rosalina about **volunteer possibilities** at Casa Chalia, checked out their studio lodging (for potential volunteers), and then took a long stroll around town. Anyone wanting to volunteer in Mexico, in this town, do **contact me!**

Met Richard and Alisa at the Hyatt Mérida hotel for a pretty reasonable buffet lunch (109 pesos), considering this is the Hyatt! and headed afterwards up to their beach house they were renting west of **Progreso**, a seaside town 45minutes north of Mérida. Progreso's possible claim to fame is its pier... a lengthy 8km long, so as to allow cruise ships and other large vessels to dock. From our beach location at night you can see the lights, and it I thought it part of the coastline at first...

Friday 22nd January 2010

A nice relaxed day on the beach with the lovelies, swimming, sandcastle building and eating great food – from the delights of small local Mexican restaurant with top fried fish, to the delicious Mexican homemade splendours as kindly cooked up by my hosts. Lots of chats about Belize and plans for visiting the jungle in this small central American country, further down the line.

Monday 25th January 2010

So with Belize not happening just yet, I decided it was the right time to head for the **Chiapas region** of Mexico, and down to Guatemala afterwards. I took an overnight bus (13 hours, 530 pesos) from Mérida to **San Cristóbal de las Casas**. The first-class ADO bus was comfortable enough to get a few hours shut eye, much helped by my essential **JetRest traveller's pillow** – thanks to Mick R. head honcho of the JetRest!

Arrived in San Cristóbal ADO terminal at 8am, slung on my back pack for a 10 minute stroll up to the Zócalo, then got some kind folks to direct me to the hostel I booked via hostelworld.com (110 pesos). **Hostel Las Palomas** turned out to be a fantastic place set in a colonial building built in 1883, with a charming courtyard, and my dorm was clean and housed some fine companions from Australia, France and Germany. The hostel staff were all charm and smiles, very helpful and friendly, the kitchen is good for cooking and the bathroom was spacious and spotless – just like the rest of the place. Pleasingly, there were facilities to **recycle** plastics (pet1 &2) and used batteries... however no other recycling or composting of organics – yet. In this part of the world, you buy returnable glass bottles (e.g. beer) in shops, paying a deposit you get back on return. Shop locally to save on legwork!

I made the most of the early morning arrival by getting out and exploring the city. No surprise many name this city their

favourite in Mexico, it was bliss to stroll around the excellent shops on Calle Real de Guadalupe, and Avenida 20 de Noviembre on my way to the great artesan and fruit & veg markets. There are tremendous buildings and museums plus a fine number of imposing colonial churches, giving the town a top atmosphere. It's chilly at night, which was fine by me, and Mexican foodie fans have plenty to choose from for a good *comida or cena*.

There's a great place to **study Spanish**, Academia Tierras Mayas (www.tierrasmayas.org), with a wonderful top-floor *mirador* (and café) giving a cracking city roof-tops view. Pop in on the way up (or down) the lengthy steps to the San Cristóbal Church. A little higher up flies the enormous Mexican flag at the top of the hill...the whole walk up will have you panting, a reminder of the town being over 2000 metres high.

A speedy two-night stay here was not nearly enough, but I reckon I will be back there before too long. Thanks to Ibiza drummer and good friend, Sha, for recommending this town – mate you weren't wrong!

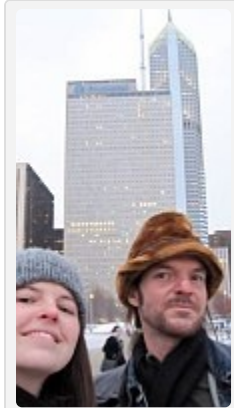
Wednesday 27th January 2010

So, moving on once more it was, Guatemala was calling. I had some volunteer work lined up at the blissful sounding Project Nuevo Mundo (see www.projectnuevomundo.com), on Lake Atitlán, and I was keen to get down there, and into *natura pura*. An organic farm in stunning settings...

Next Chapter: Guatemala, the country of trees... we're back in Central America!

Mexico slideshow is below. Click to play. Roll over with mouse to use the pause and other navigation buttons, if needed... Or click to open the album page and see photo thumbnails.

Coats and hats on folks, this is Chicago!



Andrea and Mike in
chilly Chicago

I'd be looking forward for ages to visiting the immense city of Chicago – and it did not disappoint. I was fortunate to be extremely well looked after by the **CCI / Greenheart Chicago** “family” and had a fantastic time in the windy city, despite the arctic temperatures. Meeting the CCI and Greenheart staff and visiting the excellent Greenheart Shop (greenheartshop.org) was a great pleasure. My “hostess” Andrea and the team at CCI were fabulous, and I am very grateful for all the all the superb hospitality and Chicago good times that I was shown.

The city has so many more attractions than I could check in a few days, but I was able to get a feel for things by travelling on public transport, the raised underground city trains, “The El” and buses (\$2.25 per journey). This place is huge, but you can get around easily enough and some lines are open 24hrs a day - lucky for my much delayed arrival due to the weather.

A visit to the City Library Museum set in an amazing 18th Century building was one of the best bits of my time there, as was the tippy top view of the city from the 96th floor of the Hancock building, where the heady heights were nicely complemented by a tremendous Margarita cocktail. The Millenium Park, Magic Mile and the many zones of Downtown are all great fun to check out. Food and drink experiences were abundant, and I was thrilled to get a dance in too – at the Ohm club, where legendary Chicago house DJ, Derrick Carter, was spinning on the ones and twos – what a night!

The Greenheart shop on 1911 W Division St (or shop online at greenheartshop.org), was a treasure trove of ecological products, great clothing ranges and abundant fair-trade items. A good number of the product ranges are produced by local groups such as the top-selling Beeline honey body creams and lotions. Also available are environmentally-friendly soaps made by a Chicago women's group, really nice things and handy for my keeping my washbag stocked with biodegradable smellies. If you find yourself in over here, please do visit the shop as you'll also find it a super place for gifts!

There is so much to discover and do in this city; my few days there hardly scratched the surface. A big hello and massive thanks go to Emanuel and Laura of the CCI for making it happen, and to all the guys and gals I met there... I will be back for some more fun and games before the year is

out...

Keep the Summer Solstice in 2012 free for that large knees up in Ibiza, peeps!

Photo gallery by Google Picasaweb albums below. Enjoy!

Next stop: Cancun, Yucatan pensinsular, Mexico.

January 12th, 2010 | Category: Uncategorized | [Leave a comment](#)

The flight of fluke

With six weeks of “home time” completed in the UK with a much loved and wonderful family experience over Christmas (thanks to my Macleod clan of lovelies), the excitement was rising high and the next phase of the travels was just round the corner. It was brilliant to be “spoiled” en casa with my lovely lot of family and I much appreciate all the incredible support, tippy-top food and fun times with the nippers that I was so fortunate to experience. Thanks guys!

And so 2010 rolled in and what a year is lined up for this lucky travelling Greenhearter. It was a nippy old start to things as Britain joined much of the northern hemisphere in suffering artic blasts and more snow than many have ever seen. Snow and ice, however, tend to be the traveller’s enemy and it was a case of playing it safe by getting close to the airport a good 24 hours before my flight to Chicago, USA was scheduled out of London Heathrow terminal 5. I stayed at the Chanins Hotel, Hounslow near the airport the night before flying out. It’s a good place to stay – clean, warm, economical and just a half hour ride from terminal 5 on the bus number 490 which has a stop just round the corner from the hotel.

Now flying is something that is much talked about in green circles, and the greenest of greenies will shun a flight in order to keep the carbon footprint to a minimum. My own view has been to agree that flying is detrimental for the environment,

and so it was a tricky decision to board the two winged beast that would zip me across the pond to the Americas in order to crack on with the next chapter in my travels. But lack of any realistic low-cost alternatives coupled with the fact that I have made a huge effort to fly much less in the last three years, and am actually on what is hopefully a beneficial mission – rather than just a jolly – mean that I am somewhat less troubled consciously about flying this time. That said, it is getting less and less attractive to plump for air travel these days, with cattle-herding check-in procedures, huge queues, security paranoia and all-round stressed staff. As if to underline this, my flight out of Heathrow was a whisker from being cancelled due to bad weather, and finally landed in Chicago nine hours delayed after a change of crew and pilots who were legally no longer able to take us to our destination. When we finally landed on a snow-covered O'Hare runway I heartily joined everyone else in giving the BA crew a rousing and well-deserved round of applause. Many other passengers whose flights did get cancelled weren't so lucky and were trapped in brassic Britain.

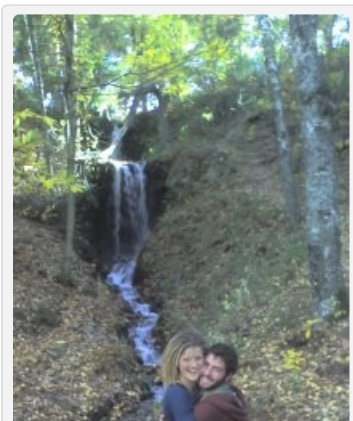
Getting out of O'Hare airport and to my hostel, downtown Chicago was a blessedly straight forward enough affair, and by five o'clock in the morning (local time), after a v. long day, I was at last switching off the light to get a few hours kip before my American adventures would start a proper. Thank my flukey old lucky stars, I'm in Chicago, Illinois. Aooooooooooooo!

January 9th, 2010 | Category: Uncategorized | [Leave a comment](#)

The rest of the west

A "catch up" post here as I need to keep moving on with the tales, and am in fact already quite some time in the future, if you get my drift. Anyhow...

With the weather turning wet and chilly in Portugal I got back on the road once more and headed south to the drier lands of Extremadura in Spain. A second visit to Finca Santa Marta took place, and there I was joined by good friends (and Greenheart Ibiza crew) Mariano and Vera.



The three of us then headed north to Mariano's town of Béjar, near Salamanca. A great little place, and nicely tucked in among the high hills and mountain streams of this quaint and historic part of Spain.

We also spent a quick two-nighter in Salamanca, where Mariano has friends,



Vera and Mariano in Béjar

enjoying some Castilla y Leon style hospitality, this area being a treat for tapas... just order a beer,

the scrán comes free and you get to choose what you'll have to scoff. Quality.

So with a final adios to Spain stopping in the town of Cuidad Rodrigo for supplies, the three of us headed out west and back into Portugal. The others were keen to visit Murray's farm and the weather there had turned a tad drier at last.

On arrival at *Quinta Linda* once more, we had to laugh as there were five Greenheart Ibiza (past and present) team members on one plot – quite a reunion! As tends to happen, we got down to “cracking on” with things and soon were tackling the task of “plastifying” the barn roof. This involved wrapping up the place in waterproof black plastic sheeting, not particularly pretty, but very necessary for winter – and no mean task considering the height of the edifice and lack of any scaffolding. Photos coming soon!

Indeed with the days getting shorter and the nights more nippy, this being late November, my time on the Iberian peninsular was coming to a close. December was to be spent in the UK in preparation for the next phase of the travels... the Americas!

November 24th, 2009 | Category: Uncategorized | [Leave a comment](#)

Portugal - go there, it's very, very nice!

A quick note before this second entry to lament both the length of time it's taken to post an update and the dodgy quality of the photos in the first entry, which were taken on my phone. Improvements are forthcoming!

So on to Portugal... ahhh! land of the mellow, peaceful, soft-handshaking folk...where sheep and goats are tenderly cared for by the locals, life is traditionally laid and nothing costs an arm and a leg. The lingo is a challenge, but plenty of smiles and attempts to communicate in my best *Portuñol* are appreciated.



The barn and house at Quinta Linda, inland central Portugal

Our “mountain man” Murray at *Quinta Linda* was kind to host this travelling Greenhearter, and to welcome me to the joy of *Caramulo* hill living: granite buildings for renovation, bubbling

brooks, verdant hills and valleys...and fruity vino from grapes picked, trodden and barreled on his very land! Marvellous. The location is some 15Km west of nearest city, Viseu, inland central Portugal and north-west of the impressive mountain range, *Serra da Estrela*, the country's highest point and a protected National Park.



The vegetable garden

The farm is a wonderful space and though the buildings have been neglected over the years there is a fantastic renovation project in progress.

So, it's down to work in the warm autumnal sun – and there's plenty to do.

I get cracking on clearing bracken from the terraced levels, collecting wood from the surrounding areas recently

logged (municipal land), assisting with living spaces renovation, removing weeds from around a channel for the river to flow and helping with hoofing things up and down the land.

This is certainly good exercise and the calf muscles of my legs agree.

Naturally there is healthy fare too, with tasty Portuguese breads, cheeses, cakes and vinos to keep us all contented. Local shops and markets in Viseu are well-priced and a pleasure to visit, lacking the crowds, hustle and bustle (and noise) of the Spanish ones. In fact there are hardly any people at all in some places.



Wind turbines at the top of the Caramulo hills

Back at base starlit night skies (no light pollution) and distant views of the mountains complete the idyllic settings and give one a great feeling peace in nature.

Up above us on the hills huge wind turbines spin quietly and efficiently.

A quick list, in no particular order of low-environmental impact living in a rural paradise, and my points of interest so far:

- Outdoor shower with homemade solar heating panel – plenty of water from the river!
- Huge garden mushrooms sprouting everywhere, tasty as!
- Photo Voltaic panels on the van roof, energy for nowt – all good while the sun shines

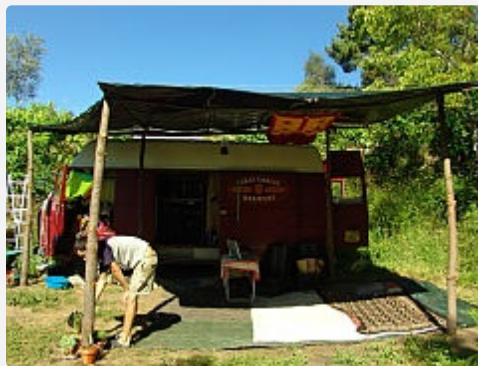
- Use the granite stone barn as a living space – at least you'll be dry
- Grapes galore... wine and fire-water (*grappa*) are expected soon!
- Roasted chestnuts! An old recycled painters pot makes a great fire brazier
- If you need to know, ask a local...one neighbour here is known as "O Senhor Google" – and his knowledge is invaluable
- Buy local Portuguese cakes and bread and cheese and wine. Cheap and delicious
- Befriend the locals and they treat you well
- And what if it rains? Head for immaculate local towns: Viseu, Vouzela or Tondela, kept in tippy-top shape and litter free by caring locals



The solar water-heater and tank made by Danny

This first visit to Quinta Linda then, is an eye-opener and a good show of how to live off-grid making fine use of the 3R's... reduce, reuse and recycle! I will be back for a second visit soon.

All photos in this post by Murray.
See **Quinta Linda** for more.



Murray's van in its final resting place



The eco-toilet gets put together from recycled wood pallets

Mike on the move...

Tales of the trails of Greenheart Ibiza's "foreign correspondent", Mike Mac, as he takes to the road on an adventure tour of discovery, investigation and taking the Greenheart message to distant lands. The return point being Ibiza in 2012.



Mike on the move

Adieu Ibiza – see you in 2012

Departure day dawned gorgeous and blue skies treated Ibiza after the weeks of unsettled weather and massive storms. Mooving out! Most fortunately, I was kept calm by some superb acoustic guitar and song singing by the lovely Natalie (of Kenyan act *Soul Force*), and Mateo from Hamburg, himself a musician of great talent – along with some *chupitos* of brandy to keep things warm and giggly...

1am – we're all in and we've got to get moving to the port! I checked on the Caista Verde lads who would accompany me to the ferry. "Wake up, boys! Seven minutes we're out a here!" We hit the port and are told the ferry departs from *el buque al otro lado del puerto*, i.e. across the other side of Ibiza port. Good advice to always arrive early for ferries. The lads and I have a last beer in the port, then drop me at the departure point. Hasta luego! Nos vemos en 2012!

Night ferry to Valencia

Acciona / Trasmediterranea do the trip at a reasonable cost (Ibiza resident 22,50€ one way), beating the terrible and totally over-priced Balearia, and, as is not unusual of Balearic ferry companies, Iscomar decided to cancel their direct to Valencia ferries in October; the Denia journey being a waste of time due to poor bus connections with Valencia. Ascomar indeed! So the large slow-moving beast of Acciona was plumped for and at the slovenly hour of 4am it left the harbour of Ibiza.

Most fortunately, I was unexpectedly accompanied by some familiar faces and Ibiza friends on the ferry, and before long the guitars were playing on deck, hands were clapping and a digeridoo player joined in the fun... it may be 4am but we'll sing this isle *adieu*!

Bon dia Valencia!

It is *far too hot* for 10am... Leaving the ferry I am hungover, tired and disoriented! What am I doing here in this diesel-minging, enormous busy port? Ibiza feels a million miles away, already, Onwards, laddie. I share a taxi with a friend from the ferry and leave my things at my kind hosts, Sol and

Alonso's piso. Time to stroll around the Valencia city, up the river bed, which is looking greener than ever after all the recent rain.

Train from Valencia to Madrid

Leaving the *Estación del Norte* in Valencia, early booking (15 days in advance) at Renfe.es means you can get a single for as little as 18,50€. The train journey is around four hours and has a nice wee bar where you can read the papers and pay too much for a not-quite-cold can of Mahou beer. Perhaps surprisingly, there are no recycling facilities on board the train.

Reunion of the posseee in Madrid

Madrid nocturno – where seeing double comes as standard.... It was a great treat to meet up with many friends there and to be looked after in the cordial way the Madrileños are second-to-none at.

A future entry will detail the occasion in all its glory, but I must keep moving lest this blog go off-track. However, my kindest thanks must go to Laura and Emanuel from the CCI, whom I met in Madrid for a fabulous lunch and mission meeting. Thanks to them this adventure of discovery is happening *de verdad*! See more about the CCI's projects at cci-exchange.com

Off to Finca Santa Marta, Extremadura

With an early start and pick up by Finca staff member Anna and her boyfriend Ricardo, I'm lucky to be driven to my next destination in luxury!

Finca Santa Marta is a converted olive oil mill, now a charming rustic country hotel, around 2.5 hours drive from Madrid. Its settings are incredible, with stunning views of surrounding hills, skies that sing with birds, olive and cherry trees in the gardens and tons of grape vines. I've visited many times before, but not for a couple of years and it is great being back and chatting with the



Finca Santa Marta - stork's nest

hosts and lovely staff there. Highly recommended for a visit, spring time perhas being the most glorious. More info at fincasantamarta.com. I shall be posting more about the Finca soon.

Next stop – deeper Extremadura!

Avanza bus Trujillo to Cáceres. Just €3,19 for the 45min

journey.

Change at bus station to Felix Magro bus Cáceres to Valencia de Alcántara (around 8€), a pleasant Extremeño town with tree-lined plazas and friendly locals.

Met by my hosts Wim and Yvon, and tucked into cañas y tapas at the grand bar restaurante, El Tabú. All buen rollo with the locals and much inviting of beer, whilst the free tapas, traditional aperitivos of the area, were thrown at us. We then head to nearby La Casiñas, small villlage where Wim and Yvon reside.

The next morning it's off to feed the horses and dogs at my hosts' rented piece of land a few kilometers from Las Casiñas. The routine includes filling



Feeding the horses!

up with all the water the animals will need that day from the local "fuente" of the village. Occasionally the water gets used by the women of the village to wash their clothes, contaminating the source and meaning a journey for Wim and Yvon to another village to fill up. Sadly traditions are still strong here and locals don't realise the damage they are doing. At least some signage could be put in place to advise they do otherwise.

After feeding we head for the plot of land my friends have bought. As we walk to the place, we're treated to stunning views all around and a great many vultures soar from giant granite boulders astride the hills, the plains stretching towards the twinkling Alburquerque in the distance, and the wonderful green and blue land-sky contrast as another dry and sunny day rolls in. Here, unlike in Ibiza, there's been little rain in September and October shows little sign of change. Luckily the area has plenty of natural springs, bubbling up to the surface and we stop for a refreshing drink from one, the whole area lush green with plants and trees.

Here, life is tranquil, nature immersed and continues at a slow and agreeable pace. The residents are freindly, helpful and always willing to stop for a quick natter. My friends and I muse over the potential of the zone for rural tourism, hiking and nature retreats. Perhaps a great spot for a future "Green Tour" with plenty of action... walking, horse-riding, photography, nature, great local food, cheap prices and top climate mean there are opportunities galore!

Whilst in the area we pass by a friend's house in the hamlet of El Pino. The house has been lovingly converted into an artistic gem, with Gaudi-like curves and cute little towers.

With the middle of October fast approaching, it was time to thank my fine friends for the for their kind hospitality and “even deeper into the jungle”... to Portugal.

Portalegre-Viseu

Wim and Yvon drop me off in the small town of Portalegre, just over the border in Portugal. From here there's a 4-hour bus ride (just over 15€, one-way) to my final destination in this first chapter of my travels... Viseu and the green lands of Fornelo do Monte, where Greenheart Webmaster-in-Exile, Murray resides with his lady and two dogs. The bus is punctual, clean and modern and winds it's way through the larger towns and up the A23 until we reach Viseu in the early evening. Happy to be off the bus, I'm greeted by Murray and Clara and we jump in the van and reach “home” in time for a local wine and a nibble of dinner. Muito bem, obrigado!

The next post will muse on the delights of **Quinta Linda** and the nature of mountain living in central Portugal. Stay tuned...
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